

VICTOR HUGO.

VICTOR HUGO, poet, romancer, dramatist, and thinker, enthusiastically admired by the ardent minds of Young France, is listened to by every civilized people. *Literal*-minded lovers of liberty—who are numerous only in England and America—and unscrupulous partisans of power have sneered at the frequent expression of his personal sympathies for revolution in Europe; they have mocked the uncalculating exile, while they have been compelled to acknowledge his genius. Our journalists have not sufficiently appreciated how effective are his personal appeals and encouragements to intensify and aggrandize the sentiment of liberty and of humanity on the Continent; matter-of-fact students of contemporary events have failed to understand the stimulative power of the political letters of the exile of Guernsey; but, however flatly these letters may fall upon the Anglo-Saxon, they touch the soul and awaken anew the aspirations of the more mobile Southern races who live so much more by the imagination and heart.

No English writer's name is so universally associated with the cause of humanity, no writer outside of France has been so intense and comprehensive in his sympathies, as Victor Hugo. At the beginning of his career he was a royalist, and received signal marks of favor from three Kings of France. He was pensioned by Louis XVIII., and honored by Charles X.; he was censured by the Academy, and his drama of *Marion Delorme* was interdicted by an order from the minister of state; in 1845 he was named peer of France by Louis Philippe. After the Revolution of February, he was elected member of the Constitu-

tional Assembly by the city of Paris, and took part in the debates with Proudhon, Louis Napoleon, and Pierre Leroux; re-elected to the *Assemblée Legislative*, he committed himself wholly to the social and democratic party under the influence of Emile de Girardin. He provoked animosity by his passionate language in debate; advocated the abolition of capital punishment; and opposed himself to Napoleon, the new President of the republic, whose prestige he labored to weaken. After the *coup d'état* of the 2d of December of '52, he was exiled by Napoleon III. He retired to the Island of Jersey, but was compelled to leave his asylum and seek another in the Island of Guernsey, which is his home at present. He then wrote "*Napoléon le Petit*" and "*Les Châtiments*," two volumes of satirizing verse. In the retirement and quiet of his English home, free from the immediate influence of the local disorders of France, given wholly to social and literary subjects and the general cause of human progress, he wrote two volumes of personal and passionate poetry, called "*Contemplations*," and his grand social romance, "*Les Misérables*."

Between 1826 and 1831 he wrote his now celebrated dramas which made a literary revolution in French letters, and won him such adherents as St. Beuve, Gautier, and Dumas. In 1841 he was admitted to the French Academy. His career has been uncommon in all its aspects. Born the 26th of February, 1802, at Besançon, of a family ennobled in 1531, his father was governor-general of the most important provinces in Spain. A great part of his childhood was spent in the military campaigns of his father, whom he accompanied with the imperial armies to

Elba, Corsica, Geneva, and over the provinces of Italy. After having seen Rome, Florence, and Naples, he returned to Paris; for ten years "he had a sweet and fecund existence in the old convent of the Feuillantines," where he commenced his serious studies under the direction of Lahorie, a proscribed general. Subject at the same time to the influence of his mother, he became imbued with the fervid sentiment of royalty which inspired his first verses. Called to Spain by his father, he studied in the seminary of the nobles, and "found an aliment for his poetic instincts in the spectacle of a new country in the light of a dazzling sun and under a new sky." Alternately subjected to the personal influence of his father and of his mother, who were animated by antagonistic political and religious ideas, he was not permitted to become a dreamer. The incessant change of his life forced him to think, and to think incessantly. Perhaps to his experience during his first years of boyhood we must attribute the dominance of an energized thought which characterizes his literary style. No writer and certainly no poet thinks more

incessantly than Victor Hugo. All the passionate questioning of the human intellect, urged by strong sensations and a profound and varied experience, is to be found in his stormy, incisive, and sometimes grand phrases. We have but to glance at his portrait to see the visible type of an aggressive and direct thinker. His square, compact head, his small, penetrating black eyes, fix the attention upon an inflexible face; a face expressive of tenacity; a face positive and bold, and indicating courage of intellect.

No one can deny that Victor Hugo's is the most intensely individualized character among all Continental writers; that his greatness forbids us to classify him with any modern genius. He has taken hold of France, of Europe even, by his vehement intellectual sympathy with the people; the energy and incessant activity of his phantasmagoric mind have always been irresistible to Young France; while his exquisite sensibility to love and the delicate and tremulous life of Nature has made his work the

delight of tender hearts that shrink from his horrible and tormented images of human nature.

Victor Hugo's is the antithesis of the modern mind, which is literal and prosaic. He is figurative and imaginative to the utmost license of language. Something enormous and something exquisite provoke the flux and reflux of his restless intellect. His works represent a vast range of experience, and unrestrained and passionate sympathies. He has made the Orient, Spain, France, Italy, and England, the background of his dramatic creations; but it is in France of the middle ages that he has made his finest studies,



Hauteville House, Home of Victor Hugo.

and exhibited a just historical genius and an unrivalled sense of the picturesque and romantic aspects of mediæval life.

Victor Hugo, the poet, is vague and vast in his conceptions; he is arbitrary and grand in his imagination—Victor Hugo, the dramatist and romancer, is definite, graphic, bold, direct, vivid. The power, the struggle, the sublime, and the colossal, that we contemplate in Michael Angelo and the grotesque sculptures of the middle ages, we contemplate in Victor Hugo's works. As Michael Angelo is alone among sculptors, Victor Hugo, by many of the same traits, is alone among writers. The grand, the bold, the complex elements of life and nature are in his writings; every thing but the fused and fluent harmonies of thought and emotion which charm us in the expression of Lamartine, of De Musset, of George Sand.

Victor Hugo's literary talent is analogous to the sculptor's. He may be said to chisel his ideas; he carves his figures; he enchases his fantasies. Whether he places before us a colossal figure, in bold, large lines, or delicate *intaglio*, deeply,



VICTOR HUGO.

sharply, but exquisitely cut, his literary manner of doing it seems closer to sculpture than to painting. His words, like strokes of the chisel, follow each other to eliminate thought; he makes his phrase exquisite, or he makes it grand—sometimes rude and brutal, as if in fury. He seldom fills his outline, and but rarely places his subject before us in full color and with delicious melting outlines, like Gautier or like De Musset, or like George Sand, whose style suggests all the flowing harmony and undulating rhythm of music—but, on the contrary, oftenest like a sculptor, like a medallist. For this reason his phrases do not easily lose their distinctive character in the translation, but strike the English reader with much of the same decided, graphic, incisive, and bold form of the original. Victor Hugo is the only writer whose style suggests that of the great Florentine sculptor. We might say he has formed his literary manner on the works of Michael Angelo and the mediæval sculptors. But it would misrepresent his genius to limit it under this classification, justly expressive as it is of his leading artistic trait. There are pages of “*Les Misérables*” which are light and full of color as a Watteau; his “*Lucrèce Borgia*” has the grave and profound tone of a picture by Delacroix; his “*Gavroche*” is like a sketch by Gavarni. All this is but a suggestion of the varied manifestations of his genius, and of the adaptation of his talent to his subject. Picturesque and sculptural, he seems beyond any other writer. He fails only to reach the harmonious and impassioned expression which should associate his name with Beethoven, as is George Sand’s. Thus far unity and fusion of power seem the only things wanting to his prodigious genius.

Victor Hugo has what no English writer since Jeremy Taylor has exhibited—that is, *fantasie*. He has what no English writer but Carlyle has manifested—that is, literary audacity; he has the historical sense of art which Browning alone, among English poets, has shown in striking and adequate language; and he has incessantly and vigorously expressed his comprehensive love for humanity, and preoccupation with the cause of the people in a literary form, unequalled for power and boldness of expression by any English author. He has been one of the foremost literary figures in France for the last thirty years, the object of fierce animosity, the leader of talented partisans, the confessed master of a new literary school. His intellectual and moral life has literally been passed in the midst of revolutions. The unity and harmony he lacks as an artist have been wanting to France. The fervid sympathy, the mental audacity, the moral temerity he has shown, mark him as a man outside of the furnished house of tradition, but initiated to all human experience; the last expression of the convulsed and struggling spirit of humanity, and preferring revolted life to lifeless art; giving the ascendancy to the man rather than to the artist. His creative faculty seems marvellous and inexhaustible, not subject to the rules of antique art, but obeying its own impulses and triumphing by force of energetic conception.

Victor Hugo continues to live as an exile on the Island of Guernsey, which lies at the entrance of the English Channel. From his house he dispenses charity to the poor and unfortunate, and gives a Christmas dinner to indigent children of the island—in every practical way illustrates his exalted and earnest sentiment of Christianity. He is, in one word, a grand and tender man, solicitous for the humblest and the peer of the greatest contemporary.

His residence, Hauteville House, which is a remarkable illustration of his *bizarre* taste, has a very complex and picturesque interior. With its inscriptions in Latin and French, its tapestries and statues and pictures, its furniture selected from various epochs, it seems as unique as the genius of its master. All description is inadequate to suggest the actual aspect of the rooms, unless accompanied by such etchings as were published by *Cadart*, in the little book entitled *Chez Victor Hugo, par un passant, avec 12 eaux-fortes, par M. Maxime Lalanne*. The full description of his home and habits has so recently been given in